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Voicing TYA festival's audiences: reception of the *Haifa International Children's Theatre Festival*

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ABSTRACT

The Haifa International Children's Theatre Festival is an annual family theatre festival held in Haifa. This qualitative reception study focuses on young audiences and the adults accompanying them. Considering the festival as a comprehensive theatrical event, this study explores how it is perceived by Israeli children and parents. Drawing on the interviews, our analysis explores the reception process, involving a sequence of actions undertaken by parents and children that result in a distinctive family experience. These actions include: choosing plays to attend; mediating theatrical knowledge; participating in performances; celebrating the festival as a theatrical event, and reviewing performances they attended.

KEYWORDS

Theatre Festival; reception; young audience; theatre for children

A festival is an enjoyable, exciting, and out-of-the-ordinary experience for participants. Getz defines a festival as a 'themed public and cultural celebration' (2012, 31) distinguishing a festival from mere entertainment because of the 'cultural values being expressed' (Getz 2012, 31). A Theatre Festival event, as a whole, can celebrate significant cultural and artistic values. A Theatre for Young Audience (TYA) festival engages young audiences with the performing arts, enabling them to develop a broader cultural knowledge. Theatre festivals, in general, may impart socio-cultural values through their repertoire, artistic direction, budget, and infrastructure.

In recent years, there have been significant advances in the study of the reception of theatre performances among young audiences, with research conducted on how attending theatre performances affects young audiences socially, emotionally, and cognitively. However, these studies focus primarily on the reception of single performances, and there is a significant lack of research on theatre festivals, especially those for young audiences. This study examines the reception of a theatre festival by young audiences in Israel in order to expose how children and their parents perceive the festival as a theatrical event.

The Haifa International Children's Theatre Festival, established in 1987, is a theatre festival for the entire family held annually in Haifa. The festival spans approximately three

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days and showcases numerous plays and performances, both indoors and outdoors. Alongside original productions, the festival hosts numerous indoor and outdoor performances by local and foreign artists. The festival's objectives, as expressed in the festival's vision statement,[1] are to advance the field of children's theatre in Israel and enhance the quality of creative works and performances for young audiences.

We claim that the festival reception among children and parents comprises a sequence of actions involving parents and children on a timeline, resulting in a distinctive family experience: selecting plays to attend; mediating theatrical knowledge; participating in performances; celebrating the festival as a theatrical event, and reviewing the festival repertoire.

The predominant influence that stands out is the significant impact of parental decision-making on children's festival experiences, along with the underlying assumptions and values guiding these decisions. Although this connection is often assumed in studies of TYA (Aram and Mor 2009; Saldana 2002), our current research provides concrete evidence throughout the entire sequence of actions comprising the experience during the festival.

Choosing plays to be viewed before reaching the festival venue begins the series of actions. The extent of children's involvement in choosing the plays to watch with their parents varies. In a few instances, children choose collaboratively with their parents, while in most cases, parents decide independently, considering the appropriateness of the play based on their children's ages, interests, and aesthetic preferences. The selection additionally reveals parents' tendency to make their choices based on their educational and family values, which could be reflected on the stage.

Mediating a play by parents is a process that involves providing the necessary context for children to understand and engage with the performance. This mediation takes place through dialogue between the adult and the child. Parents may mediate the play during the festival from the selection phase, throughout the viewing, and also afterwards. The parents' guidance regarding the content, message, and overall experience might enrich children's understanding of theatre and general knowledge.

The level of participation from both the child and parent in the play varies on a spectrum, ranging from active viewing to physical involvement in the performance, depending on the style of the production. Engagement can take different forms, whether the stimulation of children's social, moral, and emotional thinking or physical actions they are encouraged to perform while watching. Children who actively participate in a play may tend to gain a deeper understanding of it, as they are fully attentive and emotionally invested in the experience both physically and mentally.

By celebrating the festival as a comprehensive theatrical event, an intense experience for everyone involved is cultivated and family bonds are enhanced. The festive ambiance, encompassing both outdoor and indoor performances, generates a celebratory atmosphere for children and their parents. Family leisure within an aesthetic/artistic environment enriches the young audience's theatrical knowledge and empowers them to become active spectators of theatre. The festive spirit lingers with participants even after the event, during the journey back home, and for days to come, fostering discussions regarding the plays and overall experience.

Reviewing the festival as a whole and critiquing its performances occurs once the family visit comes to an end. Even the youngest audience members possess an understanding and a set of criteria for evaluating and assessing theatrical productions.

Additionally, young viewers broaden their theatrical knowledge through comparison after having been exposed to diverse theatrical styles and genres within the event.

Haifa Festival: framework, organisation, and host community

The Haifa Festival, founded in 1987, is an annual event held in Israel during the spring Passover holiday[2] and has become a significant family focused leisure event in the field of Israeli theatre for TYA events. The festival began as an initiative of Noam Semel, the Director of the Haifa Theatre at the time, and Motti Perri, the Head of the Education, Culture, and Social Affairs Administration at the Haifa Municipality. The motivation was to offer a large number of performances of varied genres and styles and high artistic quality in one festival. In this way, the festival was meant to provide an alternative to low-quality commercial events, which tend to dominate the cultural field for children. This dissatisfaction with the quality of TYA in Israel is shared in other parts of the world and become a cause for concern among artists, teachers, and scholars (Klein 1993; Lorenz 2002; Reason 2010; Schonmann 2006; Schulte 2013).

The festival's budget of NIS 2–3 million is subsidised by the Haifa Municipality, the Ministry of Education and Culture, public institutions, private donors, commercial sponsors, and ticket sales. Compared to Israeli subsidised public theatre, the budget is low, but it allows TYA artists to create performances under reasonable conditions for the event while offering them the possibility of being able to perform their productions after the festival and make a living from their art.

The artistic management comprises an artistic director who heads a committee responsible for the festival's artistic content. The artistic director's role includes selecting play and performance proposals for the competition, booking guest productions, and organising street performances. The main challenge is how to construct a high-quality repertoire based on complex theatrical language, a profound educational statement, and the intelligent use of popular genres such as musical and physical theatre. Much of the festival regulations are devoted to these issues. For example, the regulations state that the festival's goals are: ' … to develop the field of children's performances in Israel'; ' … improve the level of plays and performances for children in Israel', and ' … develop a new theatrical language'.[3]

To achieve this, the artistic management employs a strategy drawn from a model created by The Acco Festival of Alternative Theatre (Shem-Tov 2016). Ten debut performances, carefully selected from dozens of proposals and presentations by the artistic committee, participate in a competition format with financial support and professional advice provided to the theatre artists. In addition, the artistic management invites guest performances of high artistic quality that perform outside the competition. The adjective 'international' in the festival's title refers mainly to the outdoor and street performances by artists from around the world, usually specialising in various types of physical and visual theatre not based on verbal text. This format circumvents the need for performers to know Hebrew and opens the event to global performers. Over the last six years, the festival has also included street performance competitions. The festival thus enriches the young audience with diverse theatre concepts and enables local theatre artists and producers to encounter a wide range of original and creative forms of expression designed for children.

In festival studies, the term *host community* refers to the relationship between the event and the community in which it is held (Derrett 2004). Haifa is a multicultural city

comprising 89% Jews and 11% Arabs (Muslim, Christian, and Druze). It appears that over the years, the festival rarely addressed a young Arab audience or offered performances in Arabic. However, more recently, the programme was partially translated into Arabic, and one or two performances were produced in Arabic, usually outside the competition framework. Moreover, Arab theatre professionals usually have not been involved in the festival's artistic management and based on our observations in the 2022 Haifa Festival, it has been rare to meet young Arabic speakers at the festival, even at the free outdoor events, which are mostly not language dependent. Arabic-speaking participants were a rare phenomenon at the 2022 festival; therefore, this part of the host community in Haifa did not receive visibility in this article. Recently, studies on Jewish-Arab cities in Israel have examined cultural institutions and artistic activity, revealing inequality in the cultural field (Shem-Tov 2016). Yerushalmi (2022) uses Till's (2012) term 'wounded city' to describe Haifa and shows how its theatres, both Hebrew and Arabic-speaking, shape the city's political and spatial imagination. Mainstream institutions such as the Haifa Festival continue to uphold Jewish-Arab inequality.

Festival studies and research of TYA: overview

Two primary fields that overlap in this study are Theatre Festival studies and TYA. Although theatre festivals are a widespread global phenomenon and have been studied from a socioeconomic perspective (Getz and Page 2016; Pernecky 2016), research on festivals within the field of theatre studies is relatively scarce (Bardby and Delgado 2003; Fricker 2003). In Israel, only two studies on festivals have been published: on the Acco Festival (Shem-Tov 2016) and the Masraheed Festival of Arabic Monodrama in Israel (Abd Alraof 2016). Recently, there has been a growing interest in festival research within the field of theatre studies (Zaiontz 2018). To date, scholars have focused mostly on critical analysis of widely known festivals: Edinburgh (Bartie 2013), Avignon (Turk 2011), the various Shakespeare festivals (Bennett and Carson 2013), and international theatre festivals (Knowles 2020; 2021). The International Federation for Theatre Research's (IFTR) Theatrical Event Working Group proposes a theatrical framework that conceives of the festival as a holistic theatrical event rather than an accumulation of performances. At its core is 'festivalising' – the process of constructing a festival based on four components: politics, organisation, experience, and environment (Lev-Aladgem et al. 2007).

According to the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People (ASSITEJ), there is a global profusion of TYA festivals. Nevertheless, research on TYA festivals is extremely limited (Seffrin 2007; Van de Water 2009). In recent years, TYA scholars around the world have noted a connection between the quality of performances offered to children and their reception by young audiences (Klein 2005; Maguire and Schuitema 2012; Reason 2008; Schonmann 2006; Van de Water 2012). Since the early twenty-first century, substantial attention has been paid throughout the world to performances that respect children's intelligence (Gattenhof and Radvan 2009); the young audience's theatrical experience; ways in which children construct meaning and within the context of their existing knowledge (Mor 2015; Reason 2010; Reason and Sedgman 2015) and responses to the needs of different audiences as well as the reception of performances that can be understood by aligning the competence needed with the capability of the spectator in terms of their developmental stage (Maguire 2012).

A few Israeli scholars have focused on TYA. Amitai (2013) discussed the development of TYA in Israel in his historical overview, highlighting a significant shift that began in the 1980s. Prior to that period, the Orna Porat Theatre for Children and Youth was the sole professional subsidised theatre company for TYA in Israel. Responding to the demands of producers and theatre professionals, the Ministry of Education started providing subsidies to other TYA producers in the country. A pivotal moment in this shift, which had a notable impact on the standards of artistic quality, was the establishment of the Haifa Festival in 1987.

Despite the change in Israel, few scholars have researched the TYA field in the country. Schonmann (2006) deals extensively with the quality and reception of TYA in Israel and globally through aesthetic research. She discusses the reception of the Haifa Festival and points to a gap between children's and adults' reception. Other Israeli researchers have addressed TYA reception from different perspectives. Laor-Blasbalg (2012) conducted research from a contemporary developmental approach, the 'Theory of Mind', and Mor conducted aesthetic reception studies among kindergarten audiences (Aram and Mor 2009). Mor's research (2015) presents a model of three 'Cargos' (sociocultural, emotional, and cognitive) that serve as modes of reception through which children experience and perceive theatrical performances. Mor and Shem-Tov (2020) argue that children's theatrical comp[4]etence is formed through the three 'Cargos', and each additional viewing enriches them further. In other words, a reciprocal nourishment is established between the 'Cargos' and theatrical competence.

Few scholars have studied the historical development of TYA in Israel (Levitan 2000; Zer-Zion 2019). Recently, a research group studying the historical, social, and aesthetic aspects of Israeli TYA has published an anthology, the first critical and comprehensive study of contemporary and historical Israeli TYA (Schonmann, Mor, and Shem-Tov 2023).

The limited research on TYA in Israel primarily focuses on individual performances. Considering this, our article examines the festival's reception, offering insights into how both children and adults experience and perceive TYA during an intensive event featuring numerous performances. We chose the Haifa Festival because it is a significant venue for the development of the TYA field, providing valuable perspectives on the field's evolution.

Methodology

Our qualitative reception study was conducted during the 2022 Haifa International Festival, held 17–19 April 2022. The festival took place two years after coronavirus restrictions on operating in physical venues had been lifted. The festival's main site, the Haifa Theatre building, comprises 3 performance halls of different sizes: 1 large performance hall with 1000 seats and 2 smaller performance halls with 180 seats each. Additional venues are located around the Haifa Theatre building, including the municipal library and a community centre. Outdoor performances take place in a spacious garden surrounding the Haifa Theatre building. During the 2022 festival, some outdoor performances took place in shady areas, allowing their audiences to escape the hot sun and 34°C temperatures, while others unfolded beneath the scorching sun. During all three days of the festival, audiences filled the indoor and outdoor locations, including those directly in the sun.

We conducted a qualitative reception study focused on the festival audiences, namely, children and accompanying adults. The aim of the research was to examine the extent of

theatrical knowledge children have after attending the festival's performances in 2022, as well as previous knowledge they owned. Furthermore, we aimed to comprehend the young audience's perspectives and those of their parents.

Participants

The qualitative reception research focused on the festival's audiences. Sixteen participants, their ages ranging from 4 to 15 years old, participated in the study. An additional seven accompanying adults (six mothers and one father[5]) were observed and interviewed. The families came from the centre and the north region of Israel: Tel Aviv, Haifa, Hadera, Ra'anana (four cities), Sasa (a kibbutz), and Zur-Yitzhak (a community settlement). The participants come from Israel's middle class and families with a high educational background, which is typical of the Haifa Festival's audience.

Young children might feel uncomfortable around unfamiliar adults. To ensure their cooperation with the interviewers, the children needed to become acquainted with them before the festival. For this reason, we selected research assistants who had studied theatre for children at the university of college level. The research assistants selected children with whom they had a previous acquaintance and invited their families to attend the festival. This enabled them to meet the children and parents before the festival, explain the aims of the research, ensure informed consent, participants' comfort, and their right to withdraw at any stage of the research. In line with these considerations, the assistants could perform the observations while sitting next to them in the performance halls or spaces outside, as well as meet with them a day after the festival visit and interview them.

Each family was asked to choose one or two indoor performances and explore the festival complex before or after the performance, and attend the outdoor performances. In addition to touring the complex, the families used the dining and commercial facilities.

Research tools

The qualitative research focused on the festival's theatre audiences, in line with the assumptions of qualitative researchers. They define the studied phenomenon based on the words and actions of subjects who are close to the situation in its natural location (Maykut and Morehouse 1994), combined with the researcher's observation point in order to find meaning for the phenomenon (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). The study relied on tools adapted for theatre research and research with children, in order to comprehensively understand the components of the experience: qualitative observations of young audiences in the festival halls and complexes (Lincoln and Guba 1985); and Theatre Talks (Sauter 2000) with children without the presence of their parents, which are a development of qualitative focus group discussions adapted by Mor (2015) for young theatre spectators.[6]

After the Theatre Talks, semi-structured qualitative interviews were held with children and separately, with their accompanying adults (Shkedi 2011) based on data collected in the observations and the Theatre Talks. The data collected from different sources (qualitative observations, Theatre Talks with children; and semi-structured qualitative interviews) was analysed with content-categorial analysis and triangulated using Atlas.ti

software. As Yin (2018, 126) argues, ' … case studies using multiple sources of evidence were rated more highly, in terms of their overall quality, than those that rely on only single sources of information'. The Integration principle of the Atlas.ti software triangulates the data from different sources and enables the dissection of it into smaller units, which we have decided upon, merging them, and reorganising them. This principle facilitates the ability to connect or separate different types of data and search for relationships among them. Each research participant's quotation source is indicated by its acronym: PI = Personal Interview; TT = Theatre Talk; QO = Qualitative Observation.

Findings: a sequence of actions as the festival's reception

Considering the festival as a comprehensive theatrical event, and drawing on observations, interviews, and theatre talks, the findings indicate that a distinctive family experience is shaped by a sequence of actions undertaken by parents and children. These actions include choosing plays to attend, mediating theatrical knowledge, participating in performances, celebrating the festival as a theatrical event, and reviewing the performances they attended.

Choosing the festival plays

The process by which the family chooses plays to attend from the festival's repertoire[7] can be divided into two main dimensions. The first involves who makes the choice (parents and/or children) and how the choice is made. This refers to the specific methods parents or children use to choose the show or performance, such as reviewing the festival's digital programme, watching video trailers of the plays, and more. This dimension also encompasses the extent of discussion (or lack thereof) between parents and children regarding the choice. The second dimension involves the criteria for choosing plays, which include evaluating the content based on educational messages, social issues, appropriateness for different age groups, and preferred genres.

Regarding the first dimension of who chooses and how, our findings indicate that most parents make choices for their children about the plays they will watch during the festival. When one of the mothers was asked who makes the choices, it became evident that she decided without consulting her children. She responded, 'I chose! I looked at the program and chose'.

The children seemed to have accepted that the adults were making the choices. For example, Abigail[8] (age 11, PI) recalled: 'Dad chose the play we watched, I enjoyed it very much, and it made me want to see more plays'. Yorami (age 11, TT) thought the research team had selected the play he watched with his family. When asked if his mother had involved him in the decision-making process, Yorami was surprised by the question and replied: 'You chose for us, didn't you?'. After the interviewer explained that she had sent the programme to his mother for selection, Yorami said, 'Mom said: "We're going to see the play *Butterflies in the Head*", and that was it'. Clearly, the adults chose the plays without consulting their children in most cases. However, in a few instances, parents involved their children in the decision-making and used the programme and festival website to make choices together. One mother described the

process as follows: 'I chose a few options, showed them the pictures and videos, and read them the plot summaries of the plays' (PI).

This leads us to the second dimension related to the criteria for choosing a play to watch at the festival and primary consideration for parents: the suitability of the play's content for their child's age and personality. Elaborating on this, one mother related:

> The show was highly suitable. It not only had age-appropriate content but also addressed social experiences that they encounter at school. It resonated with the question of 'Who do we relate to the most among the three characters?' Are we the ones who stay true to ourselves and don't seek approval from others? The children felt this dilemma. (PI)

Given that the primary criterion in choosing a play is the child's age, selecting a suitable play for the entire family can be challenging for parents with children of different ages. A mother of two children aged four and six explained her search for a play that would cater to both: 'I was seeking a play that could accommodate my two children, considering their slight age difference' (PI).

Children, too, evinced thoughtful perspectives on choosing which plays to see. They comprehended the significance of age appropriateness and could articulate why a child of a certain age might prefer one play over another. An 11-year-old, Harry, shared his experience:

> My mother made the decision about the show without asking us, but I don't hold it against her because it turned out to be a rather good choice. In reality, she didn't have many options. The other shows were either intended for toddlers, or for ages five to nine, or five to ten, and I'm 11 years old. I also read the summaries of the other shows … and this one was probably the show I would have enjoyed the most. The other shows were all about animals, colours, or similar themes. (TT)

Abigail, (age 11), also acknowledged the importance of the age criterion. She told the interviewer:

> A younger kid could get bored watching the show because they wouldn't get it … It was just right for someone my age. Little kids might find it hard to understand all the complicated stuff that happens between people, things that a 4-year-old wouldn't think about. Like, for instance, the play I saw talked about racism. I don't think a 4-year-old would even know what that means. (PI)

Another criterion that arose in the interviews was adults choosing plays for young children with the aim of preserving their innocence. This tendency is in line with the observations of various researchers who have critically examined this issue. Schonmann, for example, has written that:

> Among the most neglected subjects in the TYP, until recently, were those that dealt with sexuality, abuse, illness, and death. […] In light of the changes that societies undergo this often seems no less than pathetic. (2006, 47)

Not only pathetic, but ignoring research that shows that art has a positive impact on the development of the child's personality, learning, curiosity and communication. Tom Maguire (2015) argues that Northern Ireland TYA could function to expand the sense of childhood beyond the immediate context. Maguire indicates that through performances that did not avoid difficult or upsetting issues, and processes of empathy, children as agents were encouraged to take part in perspectives and experiences of others.

Sex, and moreover, sexuality, are global taboos in relation to TYA, argues Van de Water, since they may challenge the innocence of the child. Recently, this taboo is changing, as she demonstrates in productions dealing with LGBTQ+ issues for TYA. Changes in the perception of taboo content stem from the fact that taboos are 'fundamentally adult constructs' (Van de Water 2012, 66). Therefore, the attitude towards these topics is changing in light of social changes occurring worldwide.

Adopting this approach of not ignoring sensitive subjects, the Haifa Festival actively promotes the exploration of complex issues. One of the goals of the Haifa Festival is to empower artists to break free from the fear of conservative choices dictated by adult audiences. Instead, the festival aims to foster performances that confront and address complex social issues.

For example, in the 2022 festival, an exceptional play was showcased, which not only tackled a thought-provoking subject but was also tailored to the appropriate age group. The play, *A Surprise Egg*, recommended for ages four and above, deals with building an LGBTQ+ family. The storyline revolved around a pair of male penguins who took on the task of incubating an egg in their nest. When asked about her choice of *A Surprise Egg*, the mother explained:

> I knew they are fond of animals, so I believed they would connect with the show and appreciate it even more. As for the content … Well, it's because of our own family … [her brother is part of the LGBT community]. I thought that if it had an impact, it would be positive. It's not about exposing them to something entirely new, as they are already familiar with it. (P1)

In addition to the ethical criterion in choosing the performance, some parents also considered the aesthetic criterion. A few of the parents mentioned artistic elements, such as music, dance, and singing, as additional criteria for choosing a play to watch. These criteria stem from the parents' familiarity with their child's artistic preferences. One mother explained: 'I told myself that my child loves songs and music. I knew there would be singing in our play, and that's nice' (P1). Similarly, another mother explained her choice, saying:

> I liked that the play was combined with songs. It was clear that this would appeal to my children more and pique their interest. It would be easier for them to follow a plot with songs incorporated than just a story that requires them to remember and follow closely. (P1)

However, not all of the parents paid attention to these aspects. When asked if she considered theatrical elements or artists when choosing shows, another mother responded:

> Oh my god, no … It doesn't bother me at all. I don't choose a performance based on the playwright or the director. I don't have sufficient theatrical knowledge to consider that. Instead, I prefer to choose a show with moral or appropriate content so that our time and money spent on it will not be in vain and will align with our family values. (P1)

In conclusion, when parents chose the plays to attend with their children, it was not an arbitrary decision but one based on careful considerations and thought about the suitability for their specific child or family values. This conclusion aligns with Van de Water's assertion: 'For the younger children, it is most often the parent or teacher who determines whether a production is "appropriate" or not' (2012, 69). While the child audience may be captive, parents make deliberate choices that align with their perception of the child's needs, dispositions, and their own values. However, when parents make

choices for their children, the important value of 'choice' itself is missed. This value is essential in fostering independent thinking and nurturing the ability to identify and express personal aesthetic preferences and tastes.

Mediating theatrical knowledge

Klein (2005) emphasises that the process of acquiring theatrical knowledge and competence occurs spontaneously through playing and watching:

> Children do not come to theatre as tabulae rasae (blank slates), upon which plays imprint 'new' ideas in their minds and hearts, but as already complete human beings with multifarious experiences and knowledge about theatre and life itself. By age six, they have already constructed basic story schemas for drama, having role-played their own scripts in pretend play since age three; and they know many theatrical conventions from watching television and film. (Klein 2005, 44)

We argue that theatrical competence is cultivated not only spontaneously through watching drama or participating in dramatic play but also through intentional mediation of adults guiding children's engagement with specific theatrical events. Studies indicate that mediation is significant for children's theatrical competence. In the field of theatre research, there is controversy surrounding the various mediation methods employed. Most researchers that focus on pre-performance mediation (Aram and Mor 2009; Reason 2010; Schonmann 2006; Prendergast 2004; Radbourne et al. 2009), assume that systematic theatre education allows a child to derive greater meaning from a single theatrical event they experience. Mor (2015) argues that the most suitable methods for mediation in TYA are attending high-quality theatre performances, pre-viewing preparation and post-viewing discussions, in addition to opportunities to participate in socio-dramatic play and performance making.

In the current research by mediating the festival, the accompanying adults played a role in their children's theatrical experience and, hence, in their theatre education. Adults' mediation is constructed of two axes. The first one is the timeline: before the festival, during the event, and after leaving the festival site. The second one is the different means of mediation that intersect with the timeline, including theatre-oriented homes, reference to theatrical conventions, theatrical semiotics, discussion of performances, and the festival's space and organisation.

A theatre-oriented family may provide good conditions for high-quality mediation before arriving at the festival. Lital, a mother, mentioned that her children watch theatre performances regularly:

> We subscribe to a series of theatre performances in Hader'as theatre hall. We made the subscription before Corona coronavirus, and either me or my husband went with the kids. (PI)

Some children demonstrated a high level of previous theatrical knowledge, associating the names of repertoire theatres in Israel with particular shows: 'Not long ago, I went to a show called Seven Dwarfs and Snow White', related Yaniv, an 8-year-old child, and his brother, Harry an 11 years old added (in TT): 'at the Orna Porat Theatre' (as noted, a well-known and high-quality theatre for young audiences).

When children watch theatre performances regularly, they can accumulate knowledge about genres in theatre:

> My son knew what mime was. Yes. He saw *Charlie Chaplin* with his father on his birthday. We were also abroad, and he watched the musical *The Lion King*. Yes, we have a theatre-play-performance culture at home. (PI)

Mediation can guide or support the development of the child spectator's knowledge or understanding. It may also enable them to orientate themselves as a form of scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, and Ross 1976). The festival is international and hosts artists from different countries, thus creating an opportunity to mediate this fact as knowledge for the children. One child, referring to the flags fluttering at the entrance of the festival area, asked his mother, 'Why are there different flags?' to which the mother replied, 'Because there are shows from many countries' (QO).

While experiencing a performance, mediation occurs as a result of parents and children being together and interacting. For example, during one performance, a girl asked her mother a question about a theatrical convention during a performance: 'Why are you clapping your hands?'. The mother explained: 'That's how they know we loved the show' (QO). The immediacy of mediation enables the formation of theatrical knowledge during the performance, in contrast to viewing a theatrical event in an educational framework, in which the mediation is done only before and after the performance by the teachers. During one of the observations, a few minutes before the curtain rose, children could be heard very excited and asked many questions (some of them about the theatrical genre: 'Mom, is this a musical? Do they sing? Will there also be talking? Did they write the show and then just put songs in it? Will there be dancing?') (QO). These moments give the parents an opportunity to enrich their children with theatrical knowledge. It should be noted that parents' attention and focus are essential conditions for mediation. In fact, an interviewer pointed out to one of the mothers: 'I noticed you didn't look at your phone, even for a minute' (PI).

Parents' central role as mediators involves showing, indicating, and explaining (Aram and Mor 2009). One parent noted: 'I pointed at the lights and setting and drew my child's attention to the beauty of those elements', and 'I said to my daughter, look at this, look at this … and we talked about the songs she is familiar with' (PI).

Every family member can serve as a mediator. During a performance, Tammy (age 5) remarked to her brother, who sat beside her, 'Look at the lamps. They are like the colours of the rainbow'. 'They are called the lighting', replied Yoav, her brother (age 7, QO). In contrast, an 11-year-old child on the brink of adolescence was ambivalent about their parents' mediation:

> Like, say mom and dad sometimes in the middle of a scene, they point at this or that, [imitates them with their finger] and explain. Sometimes, if they do it in a suspenseful scene, it's annoying, but sometimes it's okay. (PI)

Theatre conventions are also mediated by parents who serve as models, as in the above example of the mother explaining why she was clapping. Parents can also offer guidance. As another mother explained to her 7- and 10-year-old children: 'It is not just a show. It has a moral lesson. Listen!' (QO).

After the event, mediation continues as parents discuss the plot, the moral lessons, and the connections between life and fiction with their children. Shavit, 13-year-old, was aware of the significance of the parents' mediation after the performance: 'It's different

[going to the theatre] with mom or without mom, because also, if [I go] with mom, I obviously develop other conversations' (PI).

Mirroring Shavit's observation, other parents talked to their children after the play and the visit to the festival about the content and messages that arose from the performances. Soul (age 8) recounted a conversation in the car on the way back from the festival:

> On the way back, in the car, we talked about the moral lesson; sometimes there are children who don't understand things right away. Some children are also a little slower and need help. (TT)

Sometimes, the children's experiences still resonate the day after the festival. Harry (age 11) and Yaniv's (age 8) mother showed her sons a review published on a website. Harry clarified:

> Mom showed us what they wrote about the performance we watched, and they wrote from the perspective of an adult and from the point of view of a 6-year-old girl. The six-year-old girl said that when she was there, she couldn't stop laughing. (TT)

The parent used other texts as part of their ongoing mediation process, prompting their children to think and encouraging them to compare their reception to that of other spectators and their life to that of the characters on stage. Yaniv (age 8) commented,

> But why did the audience laugh in the scene when the character said a dirty word to the other? It was a sad scene. I even wanted to cry. I felt sorry for the actor; I felt like they were doing it to me. (TT)

After discussing the review their mother showed them, Harry related:

> Yesterday my mother asked us after the show who are we most similar to, the right Ron or the wrong Ron [the show was about two children named Ron. The right Ron was popular, and the other was not]. And it reminds me of something that happened to me a year ago when a not-very-smart kid who was with me in class bullied me non-stop. And he was like the leader; he had a lot of friends. And the plot reminded me of that. (TT)

As emerges from the findings, adult mediation is an integral part of the young audience's experience at the festival. Following the aforementioned studies, we assume that adult mediation also influences theatrical knowledge and theatrical competence.

Participating in performances

Theatre audiences are not simply passive spectators; rather, their presence is essential for a theatrical performance. In addition to their mental engagement, as Kennedy (2009) argues, audiences participate in the performance through physical actions such as applause, laughter, hissing, booing, and other conventional forms of audience feedback. These actions are considered integral to the theatrical event and are seen as active participation by the audience. Fischer-Lichte (2008) refers to this as an 'autopoietic feedback loop' and emphasises the cyclicality: the actors performing on stage elicit reactions from the audience, and these reactions affect the actors and may alter their performance, which in turn provokes new responses from the audience, and so on.

TYA offers audiences the opportunity to engage with the performance, and the Haifa festival increases the opportunity to derive enjoyment from physically participating, due to the accumulation of experiences.

Audience's participation may also involve playing, performing, or acting along with the actors, as the children who participated in the study expressed: 'It was funny, and it was more playing with the actors, and it was more fun, I think' recalled Orly (age 8.5, PI). Teenagers also like to be engaged in performances and participate. Abigail (age 11, PI) remarked, 'I love that the actors connect with the audience. Very much. It makes me feel like I'm also part of the show', while Dawn (age 15, PI) said, 'It's fun when it's interactive, especially let's say in street theatre that it is based more on music, so to let the audience take part is something good'. Yaniv (age 8) points out that participation for him is entertaining and empowering:

> I had more fun in *The Wrong Ron* [indoor performance] because they came up to me! They also came up to me at the street theatre! They gave me a high five! It makes me feel like I stand out! Not only that, but they also see that I'm an actor. (TT)

When the actors do not notice children, the children are often disappointed:

> I've noticed that many times when the actors have to choose someone from the audience, they never choose me [smiling] (…) It's a lot of fun if there's an opportunity to join in, so I'll always do it. (Abigail, age 11, PI)

As for the parents, a mother of two indicates in PI: 'It's always nice to see how they're exposed to performances and how they react. I try to take them to all kinds of shows like that. And if it's higher quality it is even better'.

As demonstrated, engaging in a live performance not only brings joy to young spectators but also casts them as integral contributors to the performance, making them active participants in its creation. This dynamic involvement can empower young audience, as they become an essential part of the theatrical experience.

Celebrating the festival as a theatrical event

In his seminal works, Richard Schechner posits that 'the center of theatrical activity is the theatrical event' (1979, 19) and further asserts that 'theatre is acted events' (1969, 212). These statements underscore Schechner's emphasis on the interactive dynamics between all theatrical participants – both spectators and theatre-makers – as the fundamental essence of theatre, rather than focusing solely on the written play or the staged performance. Building upon this perception, Vicki Ann Cremona extends this framework to the realm of theatrical festivals. She proposes that 'The festival can be seen as a meta-event, encompassing a series of single events that are linked by various factors. The most apparent links are certainly the name and theme chosen for the festival' (Cremona 2007, 6). To elucidate the transformative processes through which a festival becomes a theatrical event, Cremona introduces the concept of 'festivalising'. She elaborates on this notion:

> The festivalising process is very heavily determined by its dimensions (national, regional or local), the type of productions to be shown, and the type of audience(s) it sets out to attract. The spatial dimension of the festival is an essential factor, as it assumes liminal qualities of celebration. […] Multi-space festivals engender a whole range of activities besides the actual performances themselves, and in all cases, areas for meeting, discussion and relaxation, appear as essential to a festival culture. (Cremona 2007, 8).

This conceptualisation highlights the multifaceted nature of theatrical festivals, emphasising their role not only as platforms for performances but also as complex social and cultural phenomena that engender diverse forms of engagement and interaction.

The festival, as a comprehensive theatrical event, transcends the mere sum of its constituent parts. It encompasses a diverse range of theatrical styles, featuring both indoor performances and outdoor events. The Festival is a joyous celebration for the entire family. The accumulation of the festival's various performances, styles, and genres, particularly the less familiar outdoor events, contribute to the creation of a distinctive and exciting celebration. Two key aspects became evident from the analysis concerning the nature of this celebration: the significance of 'family togetherness' and the opportunity for comparative observation between indoor and outdoor performances.

Celebrating an event together as a family, begins the moment of leaving home, continues throughout the time spent at the festival site, and extends through various shows and events. This experience has a positive impact on strengthening the family togetherness. Experiencing such a celebratory event with their family is a rare treat for most children. The children in the study expressed enjoyment and satisfaction with the family celebration during the Passover holiday and the festival trip. They also emphasised the advantages of a festival: 'The most fun part was being with my family. I love them', exclaimed Orly (age 8.5, PI). These sentiments echoed by one of the mothers (PI): 'Usually, we go together. We love it; they love it. It's a family celebration'. The family celebration also provides the opportunity for parents to implement values such as family bonding and 'togetherness'.

The fact that the festival takes place during the Passover holiday enables parents, who generally cannot accompany children to such events, to join the experience: 'It was fun to go with Mom. Usually, we go with Dad or Grandma', said Soul (age 8, TT). Soul's mother mentioned this as well (in PI): 'It was fun. I haven't seen a performance with them for a long time. They don't usually go with me'.

One of the mothers related to the experience (PI): 'I really enjoyed it, I really like these events, so I had fun. I also had fun because of the "togetherness" with my daughters'. The parents' presence is significant for the children's experience, especially in emotional situations in the performances. Eight and a half years old Orly said in PI: 'It's just that, let's say, if there's a scary section, they can be with you'. The children spoke about the members of their family who were together and enjoyed the festivities; they also mentioned their fathers, who had not come along with them and had missed the experience.

The children regarded the festival as a unique phenomenon in which they did not watch a single play but participated in several performances in the context of a celebration. As Shavit (age 13) described it:

> In general, it's fun to see shows. I like it very much. But that has been a totally different atmosphere than just going and sitting and watching a show. It was like … Well, let's start with this. We watched two [performances], even more. So that alone is unique. (PI)

The children not only relate to the variety of performances but differentiate between indoor plays they are used to watching and outdoor events that they perceive as unusual and belonging to a different style than what they are usually exposed to.

The extremely hot weather (34°C) during the festival's first two days did not deter the audience from participating in outdoor performances. People sat under the scorching

sun, were fascinated, and enjoyed the shows. Nonetheless, some children referred to the outdoor events as an in-between pause. 'The outdoor performances are meant to interest people in the times between the indoor shows', remarked Miranda (age 11, PI), while Dawn (age 15, PI) noted that: 'The outdoor performances are built more on music, so they can interest the audience … they are supposed to go around and interact [with the audience]'.

Children who preferred indoor performances were able to express why:

> You can sit, and everything is more spacious and more comfortable; there is better lighting, and probably there will be more props and breathing space. Yes. Everything will be better. (Lilyan, age 13, PI)

Lilyan also pointed to the theatricality of an outdoor performance (PI): 'That kind of show should be outside. Because basically, it is about something that takes place outside and not inside a person's home'.

Some children enjoyed both indoor and outdoor performances and could not decide which they enjoyed more: 'I don't know which I enjoyed most – the street shows or regular shows'. This child's remark indicates that they considered outdoor shows 'unusual' or irregular. In addition, they described similar features in both performances. Harry (age 11), laughingly told us:

> 'You can compare the two, because in both there are actors, and they are both interesting (…) In the regular show, we sat in a closed theatre hall full of people and actors, and it was rather crowded, and one girl clung to me', said Harry. (Age 11, TT)

One may wonder whether children before COVID-19 were as conscious of crowded places as they are today.

Some participants saw the outdoor performances as 'unusual' and unfamiliar, giving rise to mixed feelings. Abigail (age 11, PI) explained why she did not particularly enjoy the outdoor atmosphere:

> I expected it to be more interesting, and there would be more attractions … but maybe it is because I've grown up since the last time I went to a festival. There weren't any particularly interesting things … Also, the street shows … it wasn't that interesting.

However, she added:

> But there were very very frightening things like those large puppets. It was scary. Little children could be scared. It was so scary. My mother said she heard children scream … it is so frightening. You can't look at it. Their eyes and the way they moved; it looked too authentic. It's good that it is authentic, but it's like crazy scary. Less suitable for children.

Abigail complained that the outdoor events were 'not that interesting'. But she used the word 'scary' five times, plus several synonyms, to describe her experience. Perhaps she projected her experience onto younger children wanting to be perceived as a teenager. The outdoor atmosphere may have been either fun or scary; either way, it made an impact.

Nonetheless, the festival certainly was a positive family experience for most, who emphasised the advantages of the festival, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. As one mother of two young children imparted:

> So, we took a day off, and we made a full vacation of it. In the morning, we went to the show, and then to a restaurant, and then did some shopping. So, the whole event was a day of fun. It was great and special for them. They were not used to it. For two years, they were shut in. They hardly have memories of these experiences: a large mass of people; children. I think, from this perspective, it was a fun experience.

Reviewing the festival repertoire

Reviewing involves critiquing, evaluating, and expressing opinions about the experience – negative or positive. 'I had a lot of fun. I loved all the parts', said Itai (age 6, TT). Children usually summarise their viewing experience in one word: 'fun' or 'boring'. However, the research findings revealed a set of criteria employed by both children and adults when evaluating or critiquing performances at the festival. It also shows the indirect impact of theatre-oriented homes on the already implemented theatrical knowledge of children while reviewing the festival. These criteria include factors such as the level of enjoyment derived, the quality of acting displayed, the intricacies of space design, the effectiveness of music and sound, the suitability of the performance for different age groups, and comparisons drawn with other festivals, as Abigail (age 11, PI) compares:

> At the Haifa festival, there are more plays made just for kids. Plays that are more interesting, and many fun things to do. But in Acco festival, it's a bit different. They have plays for grown-ups, but there's not as much to do. It's mostly like stalls and stuff over there.

From the interviews with the parents, 'enjoyment' emerged as a significant criterion, and highlights their concern for ensuring that their children have a good time. One parent expressed her delight and contentment with the experience:

> I had a lot of fun. I was happy for them. That they came to see a play, and they had this experience. They seemed to be enjoying themselves. They seemed interested. They were attentive. It was very good. (PI)

Additionally, some parents recognised the importance of not only providing enjoyable experiences but also affording their children the opportunity to appreciate and engage with artistic excellence. For example, one parent, a mother of three, proudly expressed:

> I love to see that they enjoy the experience, they know how to enjoy it, that they know how to identify what is higher quality and what is fun but less quality. (PI)

Older children, or those with some background in theatre from home or school, tended to look for features and quality of acting. The children consciously expressed their expectation of the acting quality. In Orly's (age 8.5, PI) opinion: 'The actor needs to know how to act well, to not mumble, and to remember the script, and that's it'. Amit (age 6.5, PI) spoke about the importance of physical skills: 'Knowing how to do things … not to be scared of heights, know how to do special things'. Lilyan (age 13, PI) referred to the uncertainty and spontaneous dimension of acting: 'Improvisation! He needs to know to improvise. Because, think that the actor suddenly gets stuck, forgets the text, so either he or the actors who participate with him, need to know what to do on the spot, immediately'.

Miranda (age 11, PI) emphasised the significance of directing the audience's focus as an additional facet of acting:

> The actor's job is to make sure we're totally focused on them and not distracted by anything else. They want us to watch only them and pay attention to everything they're doing in the play.

Dawn (age 15, PI) was interested in the convention of constructing the empty space through acting:

> The actors play an important role in setting the atmosphere, almost like creating a stage setting. They can make us feel like there's something happening on stage, even if there's nothing physically present.

Dawn understood that the actors' talent brings the scene to life and makes the audience believe in the fictional world they are portraying in the empty space.

For Shavit (age 13, PI), three types of dialogue in the rehearsal process and in the performance were important:

> Perhaps the actor should also know how to build the show, know what will come after what, and give notes to the director if something does not seem right. The actor also needs to know how to collaborate with his partners and also stimulate the audience, like, activate them, stand in front of an audience and bring the audience into the play.

The physical space in which the performance takes place shapes the horizon of the audience's expectations (McAuley 1999). An architecturally impressive theatre arouses the expectation of artistic performances at a high professional level and gives the viewer a sense of partnership in cultural capital (Urian 2002). On the other hand, a physical space not intended for theatre, such as a converted hangar, raises expectations for alternative and avant-garde performances. A performance held in a school or community centre raises low artistic expectations. At the Haifa Festival, the performances occur in a variety of spaces, some in the performance halls of Haifa's municipal theatre, and some in open spaces. Another part is held in venues not intended for performances, such as a library or community centre. Therefore, every space in which a performance was held at the festival raised different kinds of expectations, as evidenced in the words of one parent:

> Honestly, I didn't come with such expectations. And when I saw that the performance is located in the community centre, I said, 'Wow'. And then I saw that it was downstairs in the basement, and then I realised that it was a hall without seats, my expectations deteriorated. And then the show started, and it really surprised me; I thought it was very good and of very high quality. I love it when new actors who have just graduated from acting school perform … It makes me feel like I'm part of something … a startup that deals with creativity and art. I really enjoyed the show. (PI)

The open spaces at the festival generated creative design potential and contributed to the viewers' aesthetic experience, as was evident in the words of another parent:

> For me, the outdoor space does something different because it's sometimes less formal, and there's something that creates authenticity. I watched the performance *Two of a Climb*; it was located among trees, so it looked authentically designed, which I find cool. It turns basically every place into a theatre, a place of expression, art, and creativity. Cool. (PI)

Young theatre spectators evidenced a heightened sensitivity towards the sound design of a show and the accompanying musical soundtrack. Their comments reflected an understanding of how music shapes the atmosphere of dramatic situations and facilitates their

immersion in the fictional world. For example, Dawn (age 15, TT) did not enjoy certain parts of a show due to the absence of music: 'The parts of the show without music were quite dull'. She even proposed a potential solution: 'They should play light music because it helps to create a sense of being part of the story'. Similarly, two siblings aged 4 and 6, when asked in TT about their favourite aspects of the play *A Surprise Egg*, expressed dissatisfaction related to sounds: 'We didn't like the sounds made by the penguins. They bothered us'. This observation illustrates how audio elements can interfere with young viewers' ability to connect with the characters on stage.

Children provide reviews and critiques of the shows, subsequently cross-referencing them with the producers' recommendations to determine their appropriateness for their age group. When asked his expectations regarding a performance they chose to attend, Harry, (age 11, TT) remarked:

> At first, I thought the show was for little kids. The program said it was for 8–12-year-olds, but when I read what it was about, I thought it would be better for eight to ten-year-olds. But when I actually watched it, I was really surprised! To be honest, it ended up being one of my favourite shows ever!

The families' assessments of the quality of the Haifa Festival were not based solely on the event itself. Comparisons with other theatre festivals in Israel were inevitable. One such festival is the Acco Festival for alternative theatre, which is primarily intended for adults, with outdoor events suitable for the entire family. Established in 1980, the Acco Festival is the oldest theatre festival in Israel and inspired the Haifa Festival (Shem-Tov 2016). Abigail (age 11, PI) compared her past experiences at the Acco Festival with her experience at the Haifa Festival. In her opinion:

> The Acco Festival was really fun and had more performances than Haifa's. It had lots of performances from all over the world, with music, without music, with talking, without talking, even with cool lighting.

On the other hand, one parent appreciated the organisation of the space at the Haifa festival, which was designed with a young audience in mind. She explained (PI):

> If I compare it to the Acco festival that took place all over the Old City, there was a lot of walking and distance between locations. It suits the Acco festival's audience. However, there was something very intimate about the space at the Haifa Festival. Initially, I was concerned about the outdoor performances being so close, but upon reflection, I realised it was planned well and didn't bother us. Let's not forget, it's a festival for children, and that's what makes it special.

As previously argued, children typically articulate their experiences using concise language. However, young audiences from theatre-oriented homes may employ a set of criteria derived from their prior theatrical knowledge when evaluating or critiquing performances at the festival.

Conclusions

This article focused on a theatre for a young audience (TYA) festival from the perspective of the audience, including both children and parents. The study emphasises the distinctiveness of the festival compared to watching a single play in regard to parental impact. The abundance of events and performances within the festival exposes young audiences

to artistic expressions not commonly found in TYA in Israel, and to a series of actions made with their parents, which might strengthen the childrens' theatrical competence. This exposure, combined with the intensity and accumulation of experiences at the festival, enriches the children's general knowledge and theatrical competence and leaves a lasting impact for the future.

The study highlights that the festival experience encompasses a series of actions that unfold over time: play selection, mediation for children, active participation, event celebration, and review and critique. This series of actions structures the festival as a comprehensive event. In all series of actions, the impact of parents on children's experiences is noticeable. Most parents choose the performance their children will watch based on a deep understanding of their children's preferences, in accordance with their age and family values. During the performance, parents may mediate it for their children in a way that directs their viewing and enriches their theatrical knowledge. Parents enable children's participation, thus fostering the engagement of children with the performances. The festivity and the sense of togetherness invite parents to strengthen family values such as family bonding and a sense of belonging, thereby increasing the influence of parents on children's experiences. When parents review festival performances together with their children after its conclusion, they indirectly influence the formation of the children's theatrical competence.

Notes

1. https://www.haifakids.co.il/ContentPage?Id=46.
2. During Passover, there is a week-long vacation exclusively in Jewish schools.
3. The Festival's Regulations: https://www.haifakids.co.il/ContentPage?Id=46.
4. According to Mor and Shem-Tov (2020), Theatrical Competence of the audience is a communication skill that facilitates viewing, participation, and interpretation of the theatrical event. For example, it includes knowledge of theatrical conventions (suspension of disbelief), semiotics (understanding the signs of theatre on stage), and aesthetic distance (the ability to emotionally balance the theatrical experience).
5. The research sample is relatively small, and participant selection was random. Therefore, the fact that there are more mothers than fathers in the sample cannot be generalised for discussion on the gender issue
6. The attitude of the interviewer should be more compassionate, so the children will feel comfortable. Therefore, Mor suggests arranging a smaller group of participants (two to four), as opposed to seven to eight in Sauter's Theatre Talk; The interviewer should meet the participants beforehand; While Sauter conducts theatre Talks immediately following the performance, it is recommended to hold Theatre Talks with young children the day after the performance, as they are often emotionally overwhelmed immediately after the show and not ready to discuss their experience.
7. Choosing which performances to attend during the festival is centered on indoor events exclusively. To secure seats in the viewing halls, it is imperative to purchase tickets in advance. Outdoorevents, on the other hand, are comparatively brief (ranging from a few minutes to 15 minutes). These events are regularly scheduled in adjacent areas. The viewing experience is spontaneous in open spaces, and no pre-selection is necessary.
8. All participants' names are fictitious. All quotations were freely translated from Hebrew into English by the authors.

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